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Out of the White House basement

If there was one thing Ronald Reagan's top advisers were determined to avoid when they came to power six years ago, it was another Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski in the White House. Their national security adviser was not to be a foreign policy player, but a clerk.

To symbolize the shift, President Reagan's original security adviser, Richard Allen, was deprived of the traditional spacious first-floor office around the corner from the president's and was relegated to the basement. He was also deprived of direct access to the president and the right to issue instructions to the bureaucracy in his name.

After Robert McFarlane got the job in October 1983, the trappings and perks were restored, but not the power. So Mr. McFarlane compensated by tripling the NSC staff, establishing a "crisis management center" and gathering around him subordinates who were "forward-leaning" — bold, imaginative, and aggressive. One of his favorites was Lt. Col. Oliver North.

Mr. McFarlane left office in January 1986, before Col. North began diverting the proceeds from Iran arms sales to the Nicaraguan "contras," but he was the man who built the system that Mr. Reagan's incoming fifth NSC adviser, Frank Carlucci, is in the process of reforming. Mr. Carlucci has made it clear in taking his new job that he will have direct access to the president, instead of having to go through the White House chief of staff.

Mr. McFarlane left the NSC after a crushing battle with chief of staff Donald Regan, who stopped at little to secure his place as gatekeeper to Mr. Reagan. Mr. Carlucci presumably won't have to face that problem, especially if Mr. Regan is replaced. Still, he will have to overcome other endemic problems that dogged Mr. McFarlane and ultimately led to the Iran "contra" mess.

Most basic is the absence of either an overriding Reagan world strategy or a single true strategist. The one idea that could remotely pass for strategy was: Build Up and Bargain. Mr. Reagan seems to have spent his first term repairing the nation's defenses and getting a start on Star Wars, with the idea of being in better position to reach arms reduction deals with the Soviets in the second term.

Mr. McFarlane understood the strategy and was a principal bureaucratic father of SDI, but he could never secure agreement from Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger — or Mr. Reagan — about U.S.-Soviet policy, strategic doctrine, or bargaining tactics.

Under Mr. Reagan's Cabinet-style of government, Mr. McFarlane found that on most serious issues Mr. Shultz and Mr. Weinberger were in conflict, and the president would not empower his NSC adviser to impose a decision. The result was paralysis.

Failing to achieve any breakthroughs in Lebanon or the wider Mideast conflict, the administration settled on terrorism as a problem it could attack. Only 60 Americans have been killed by terrorists around the world in the three past years, but terrorism became a major preoccupation. Even here there was bitter conflict between Mr. Shultz and Mr. Weinberger over the use of force, and it was only when Libya's Col. Muammar Qaddafi provided provocations and a convenient target that the administration could come to agree on use of military power.

Even if Mr. Weinberger and/or Mr. Shultz were to leave office, an enduring problem for Mr. Carlucci or any other NSC adviser in a Cabinet government is the influence of the State and Defense bureaucracies on their secretary.

Mr. McFarlane and his aides came to believe that foreign service officers are temperamentally unwilling to change any existing pattern of relationships with other countries.

And the military, they believed, was so wounded by the public's failure to support it in Vietnam that it wanted no part of any but the most quick and popular involvement.

Mr. McFarlane's solution to the bureaucratic problem was to assemble his own clutch of hyperactivists who would think about problems unconventionally and occasionally undertake missions of derring-do.

And, of course, these included Ollie North, 43, the swashbuckling former combat officer and clandestine operator in Southeast Asia who became like a younger brother to Mr. McFarlane and a grandson to Mr. Reagan, who called him "my Marine."

A colleague says, "You'd always see Ollie shouting into two phones at the same time. He had this 24-hour-a-day aggressiveness . . . You'd be in a meeting, and all of a sudden Ollie would rush in and yell, 'I need such and such — now, or people will die.' He loved the world of false passports and secrecy, which made it perfect for him to work on terrorism, the 'contras,' and then hostages. He'd always tell you, 'Don't ask me how; I get things done.'"

NSC colleagues think it entirely possible that if Col. North learned that President Reagan wanted hostages rescued and "contras" aided, he would take up the task and not tell anyone precisely how.

Col. North is the object of considerable affection among NSC colleagues, but he's also judged a spy who never learned the rules: don't mingle operations; compartmentalize them, so if one is blown, all are not; use cutouts, not U.S. government personnel, when dealing with unsavory characters. As one NSC aide said, "The lesson from all this ought to be, leave it to the pros."

The Iran operation that has led to such disaster seems to have started out as a piece of McFarlanesque geopolitics: an attempt to make contact with "relative pragmatists" in the Iranian government who may be in a position to resume relations with the West when the Ayatollah Khomeini dies and to keep the country out of Soviet hands. The policy apparently went awry when the McFarlane team began making guns and hostages the currency on which U.S.-Iran relations were based. Mr. McFarlane himself seems to have understood this and recommended cancellation of the policy in late 1985.

It was mysteriously revived in January, however, and then Mr. McFarlane joined up again for one last triumphant mission. He may have been trying too hard to play Henry Kissinger, whom he served as an executive aide in the Nixon White House. In an op-ed piece, Mr. McFarlane likened the Iran approach to Mr. Kissinger's secret opening to China.

2.

but a critic jibed, "That would be like Mr. Kissinger showing up in Peking with a planeload of guns for Chou En-lai and hoping no one would tell Mao Tse-tung about it. Ridiculous."

Indeed, the misjudgments here seem atrocious. They were the products of frustration and overreaching, fear of leaks from the press and Congress, bypassing professionals in favor of overeager amateurs, perhaps excessive preoccupation with crises (like terrorism and hostages) trumpeted on television.

But there's a danger that just as Congress tried to dismantle the CIA after Watergate and the American people elected an innocent (Jimmy Carter) after Richard M. Nixon, there will be an overreaction after the Iran/"contra" affair. Congress does not need to micromanage foreign policy even more now; it ought to do so less.

The NSC does not need to be weakened, but strengthened in its proper and original activities: preparing honest options for presidential decision, brokering differences between departments and forcing them to abide by presidential policy, providing independent judgments on what policy the administration ought to adopt.

Mr. Carlucci will not need to do less than Mr. McFarlane and his team of activists did. To make anything positive happen in foreign policy for the next two years, he will need the power to do more.